

## Composing the Uncollectible

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I am both an academic and a comics creator: these writing selves have grown up together and are deeply intertwined. The indie comics creator in me drives my academic work to move between analysis, autobiographical reflection, and cartoon art, and the academic in me theorizes how comics work or could work as they pour out of me.

I've published my comic series, *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School!*, in print and online since 2008. While to some people comics might be fetishized artifacts to be collected, I have developed a rhetorical strategy of creating *uncollectible* comics.

An uncollectible comic takes a decolonial approach to the relationship between the collector and the collected. In his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, the decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo asks the question, "Who establishes criteria of classification?" and, who gets classified (83)? His critique suggests that the act of collecting and classifying is a colonizing gaze—a position of power where you impose order and control on something you possess. This critique implicates scholars and comic geeks alike, and I have used the tropes of one group to challenge the practices of the other.

Uncollectibility doesn't mean you shouldn't buy comics or own them, or that I don't want people to buy or own my comics. It's more that I have over time developed a strategy of making things *that fail to be collectible*.

An uncollectible comic is fundamentally incomplete, implying a greater whole that is not actually attainable. It deliberately sabotages attempts to create "absolute" or "ultimate" editions or knowledges about itself. Uncollectibility as a strategy recognizes that comics are ephemeral, and that this is a virtue and not a flaw. A comic is a moment in time as well as a material artifact. It refers to a larger whole (in my case, by being part of my series) but that whole may not exist or may never be attainable: the series is never complete because completeness is always deferred. My comics' numbering scheme and irregular schedule make it difficult if not impossible to know exactly how many there are and whether or not you'll ever get any more. Some gaps in numbering suggest the existence of "missing issues" that I never actually drew.

I make hybrid comic book—coloring books that explicitly ask you to permanently alter the text, and comics with activity pages that leave part of the content of the book up to the reader. This began as a take-off on "Mad Libs" that I never expected anyone to fill out. But they did complete them, and then shared their responses with me. The inclusion of an activity page as a joke (because, who would ever actually write in their comic books?) then grew

into deliberate blank panels, where the reader is instructed to draw themselves in, and blank dialogue and thought balloons, where readers are asked to write their own content (see fig. 1). Seeing my readers interact with my comics (literally watching people color them in) has taught me that comics are both things and happenings. Comics have multiple selves.

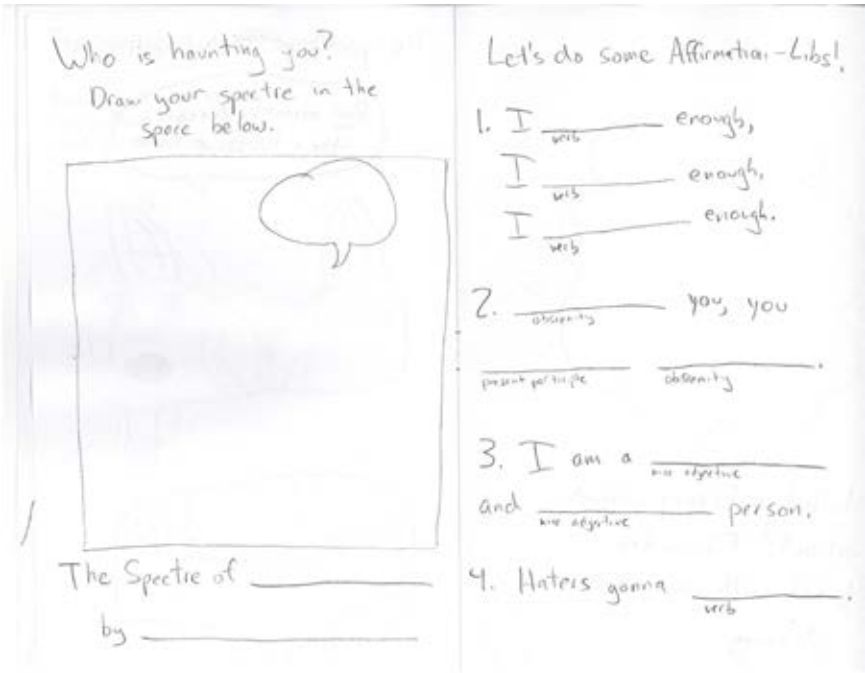


Fig. 1. Activity pages from *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School! Coloring and Activity Book*, 2012.

I realize that I don't need to tell the field of writing studies to be careful about the power dynamics of a mint condition copy of *The Death of Superman*. But what I do want to say is that to collect a comic means more than just to be a fan and have a collection that you keep in pristine condition. The gaze of the collector is one of mastery. It is a judging gaze that evaluates what belongs and what does not belong. We collect comics all the time when we assemble them into bibliographies or syllabi or "essential" editions.

I have worked to disturb this relationship. The rhetorical practice that surfaces in *Oh Shit, I'm in Grad School!* is ultimately about challenging my audience's notions of how to value a text, how to compose a text, how to interact with a text, and what a text is in the first place. My comics are by design unassimilable into Western ways of scholarly knowing, although this

is an ironic thing to realize from having literally just finished writing a dissertation about them.

Finally, an uncollectible comic says this: don't collect comics, attend comics. "Attention" is a way of knowing that doesn't presume mastery or ownership. Attending comics emphasizes space and time, seeing comics as something you go to rather than something you study and read. It implies listening, watching, and actively relating. As Shawn Wilson writes, in an indigenous research paradigm, knowledge is relational, and truth is a form of right relationships (80, 114). What I have learned from decolonial feminist thought and research is that all scholars can benefit from rethinking (and decolonizing) the knower's relationship to the known. But furthermore, as a rhetor you can design a text to emphasize these ideas. If its materiality challenges the reader, if its serialization challenges the collector, if its absence of seriousness challenges the scholar, if its seriousness challenges the nonscholar, if its interactivity challenges the book lover, the relationship between the audience and the comic is brought to the foreground.

Attending comics is a different way of being: it is phenomenological. One reads a comic, but attends comics. Attending looks at a comic as part of a web of relations: connected synchronically and diachronically to other things and people. Attending comics recognizes that any one comic we hold is only a thread: not a discrete or masterable text, but both a window into a place and a place in itself. When we attend comics, we listen with our eyes.

### **Works Cited**

- Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.
- Wilson, Shawn. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Black Point: Fernwood, 2008. Print.